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MIDNIGHT MOVIES

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Midnight *movies*

Though the term "midnight movies" appears in trade journals as early as the 1920s to describe the methods by which a filmmaker might construct an "'apparent' night scene" while shooting in daylight (Richardson 1927), its relationship to "cult" or "underground" film begins in the 1950s and early 1960s. As local television stations began dumping low-budget films into their late-night time slots, outside the home, midnight screenings of "obscene" films like Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* and Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* were being cancelled by city officials and theater managers who were concerned that the "low quality of the underground" might damage their theater's reputation (Hoberman & Rosenbaum 1983: 51). Over the course of the 1960s, though, a number of moviehouse owners in New York and Los Angeles began to recognize the potential of the underground market as a means of drawing in a younger generation of "countercultural" filmgoers, many of whom were marginalized by mainstream culture along the lines of class, sexuality, and politics. Ben Barenholtz of the Elgin Theater in New York opened his doors to the idea of midnight screenings in 1970, hoping they "would attract hipsters, encourage a sense of 'personal discovery,' and stimulate word of mouth" (Hoberman & Rosenbaum 1983: 93).

The first film to find lasting success at the Elgin was Alejandro Jodorowsky's *El Topo* (1970), an apocalyptic Mexican western with bizarre religious symbolism, explicit gore and sexuality, and "freakshow" characters who rebel against their oppressors. The film received next-to-no advertising, but word-of-mouth buzz helped *El Topo* sell out the Elgin for six straight months. This word-of-mouth snowballed into public discourses with help from celebrity endorsements (John Lennon championed the film) and mainstream media coverage (the *Village Voice* referred to *El Topo* at the Elgin as a ritualistic experience akin to "midnight mass") (O'Brien 1971).

Following the success of *El Topo*, the midnight movie circuit exploded into a vibrant and lucrative model of alternate cinema exhibition. Scholar and filmmaker Stuart Samuels (2005) canonizes *El Topo* and five other films – *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *The Harder They Come* (1972), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), and *Eraserhead* (1977) – as the definitive midnight movies "hits," although many more films gained traction on the midnight circuit. Older exploitation movies and "forgotten crap" (Patterson 2007) like *Reefer Madness* (a 1936 film about the life-threatening dangers of marijuana) and *Freaks* (a 1932 film

about circus "freaks" which was banned for 30 years in the United Kingdom), also held regular midnight slots throughout the 1970s.

Scholars have taken two major approaches when researching the midnight movie phenomenon. The first, "midnight *movies*," approaches midnight movies as a set of cult films and emphasizes the aesthetics, narratives, themes, genres, and production and distribution histories of these "successful" midnight texts. And because the phenomenon emerged in a time of (counter) cultural anxiety and precariousness, midnight movies have been conceptualized as a group of transgressive movies with "radical aesthetics," camp, taboo or exploitative content, "graphic depictions of sex and violence," "explorations of immorality," and an "anti-establishment stance" (Mathijs & Sexton 2011: 14). A few highlights include zombie cannibalism in *Night of the Living Dead*, incest and coprophagia in *Pink Flamingos*, transvestism in *Rocky Horror*, drug use in *The Harder They Come*, and the infamous freak "baby" in *Eraserhead*. This has led to the proposition that aesthetic and stylistic transgression (Grant 1991), sexual excess (Studlar 1991), or subversive racial politics (Kinkade & Katovich 1992) are core characteristics of the midnight movie. Others such as Gregory Waller (1991) examine the genres of midnight movies, noting that oppositional or lowbrow faire was the most fertile for cultivation on the 1980s midnight circuit, in the form of comedies which challenged "good" taste (*Monty Python and the Holy Grail*), heavy-metal movies (*Pink Floyd: The Wall*), and campy horror films (*An American Werewolf in London*).

In addition to their transgressive images and themes, midnight movies have also been categorized by their failures. The backstories of Ed Wood's "failure" as an auteur and Bela Lugosi's "failed" comeback inject so-bad-they're-good movies like *Plan 9 From Outer Space* and *Glen or Glenda?* with a cultish aura. Similarly, films which flopped during their original release were picked up and embraced by the midnight circuit. *The Harder They Come*, *Rocky Horror*, and *Night of the Living Dead* all constituted critical and commercial failures when they were first released in the United States – the latter even failed elementary distribution procedure when it entered the public domain by way of a forgotten copyright notice.

While these insights are invaluable, one problem with "midnight *movie*" approaches when taken alone is that they often use the terms "midnight movie" and "cult film" synonymously, at times even interchanging one for the other within the same sentence. The conflation of these two terms not only diminishes the intricacies and relevance of "midnight movies" as both a concept and an experience, but it also leads scholars to either privilege a select grouping of films or to paint an unnecessarily-nostalgic "golden age" in film history rather than to examine a cultural practice which continues to evolve today. As a result, scholars sometimes engage in what Matt Hills (2015: 104) calls a "mainstreaming discourse" which frames technological advancements that offer ever more accessible and "easy" forms of consumption – the VCR, Netflix, and YouTube – as detrimental to the subcultural capital of cult fandom. Hoberman, for instance (1983: 328), suggests that by the end of the 1980s "serious" midnight movies were fading and that "students no longer head to cinemas at midnight looking for a participatory and collective experience that might change their lives." Indeed, the arrival of the VCR prompted many of the original midnight theaters to close their doors by the end of the 1980s (Mathijs & Sexton 2011: 14) and only a handful of "midnight *movies"* would gain traction over the next three decades, among them *Liquid Sky*, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert, Donnie Darko,* and *The Room*.

Yet, while the 1980s and 1990s lacked new midnight-movie "originals," they gave rise to important trends which wholly contradict the "midnight *movies*" approach: most notably a co-option of midnight exhibition practices by mainstream multiplex cinemas and Hollywood distributors. In 1980, for instance, a number of theaters held midnight premiere screenings of *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*. Echoing the media coverage of *El Topo* ten years

earlier, The Seattle-Post Intelligencer (Egan 1980) described these screenings as religious, ritualistic experiences: "The midnight show was for the most religious of followers, and that showed in the instant recognition every nuance and slice of trivia evoked." Franchise and tentpole releases like *Star Wars Episode VI: The Return of the Jedi* (1983), *Batman* (1989) and *Batman Returns* (1992), *Jurassic Park* (1993), and *Titanic* (1997) also received limited midnight premieres throughout this period.

The monumental midnight release of *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999) precipitated a model in which midnight premieres became not only normalized as an exhibition practice but also packaged and sold as exclusive "events." This co-option of midnight consumption culture emerged as a mode of harnessing the fleeting nature of time to construct more exclusive, inaccessible spaces within a mainstream market of accessibility and social acceleration (Hills 2015). Other factors that propelled the co-option process include an increasing cultural fascination with box-office numbers and records, the instantaneity of social media and digital word-of-mouth, a sharp collapsing of a film's average theatrical run and theatrical window, and a heightened debate over public and private modes of consumption (Moulton 2014: 361).

Since 2000, multi-film franchises like *Harry Potter*, *The Pirates of the Caribbean, The Lord of the Rings, Transformers,* and Marvel's "Cinematic Universe" continue to break midnight box-office records. In 2015, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2's* midnight record of $43.5 million – which constitutes an incredible 11% of its domestic revenue – was shattered by *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* ($57 million).[1] Midnight premieres are now often pushed to earlier, Thursday-evening time slots – a move that began with *The Matrix Reloaded* in 2003 (10 P.M. showing) and intensified in 2012 after the shooting in Aurora, Colorado at a midnight screening of *The Dark Knight Rises.*

In addition to midnight blockbuster premieres, midnight cinemagoing continues today primarily in two other forms: a "meta-midnight" circuit and "experiential cinema" (Atkinson & Kennedy 2016a). The first, a "meta-midnight" circuit, which flows through college towns and independent cinemas around the world, continues the regular screening of cult films at midnight. Film festival programming like the Toronto International Film Festival's "Midnight Madness" and South-By-Southwest's "Midnighters" also fit into this meta-midnight model, wherein audiences are "aware of the legacy of the midnight movie phenomenon" and contribute to the "heritage of the phenomenon by keeping it alive" (Mathijs & Sexton 2011: 15). The notion that meta-midnight audiences are cognizant of a cinemagoing tradition larger than themselves makes sense given the "just-before-my-childhood" nostalgia – films like *Back to the Future, The Goonies, Ghost World, Ferris Bueller's Day Off, Labyrinth*, and *Blue Velvet* – that pervades the meta-midnight circuit today. Additionally, these films allow a slightly older group of filmgoers to revisit their childhood favorites while displaying a "badge of honor" – a retroactive, pre-subcultural capital in the form of memories and lived experience (Hills 2015: 108).

Second, "experiential cinema," or what Donna de Ville (2011: 1) calls "full immersion film events," constitute more explicitly-thematized and social exhibition contexts which are usually offered as one-off or semi-annual special events. Experiential cinema programming enhances and augments film screenings through "synchronous live performance, site-specific locations, technological intervention, social media engagement, and all manner of simultaneous interactive moments including singing, dancing, eating, drinking, and smelling" (Atkinson & Kennedy 2016a: 139). In this market, specialty exhibitors – including the Alamo Drafthouse, Rooftop Cinema Club, Secret Cinema, and the El Capitan Theatre – often become the subject of cult followings themselves (de Ville 2011: 14). Special-event offerings such as quote-a-longs (*Ferris Bueller's Day Off, The Princess Bride)* and sing-a-longs (*Frozen*, *The Sound of Music*) also belong in this category.

Fitting the widespread incorporation of midnight exhibition into textual or aesthetic approaches to midnight movies presents a challenge, since many mainstream films – especially blockbusters – simply cannot be explained using a model which emphasizes oppositional aesthetics, transgressive textuality, or commercial failure. Mathijs and Sexton (2011: 215) make an attempt by proposing that these newer midnight blockbusters might also be explained through excess, as being "too big," "supersized" texts which cram every nook of public culture with their special effects and "illogical, unhinged stories." They (2011: 217) and other scholars have also cited the pre-sold, intertextual nature of blockbusters to suggest that such films often contain "built-in cult potential" found either in related materials that already have cult followings (books, video games, theme park rides, board games, previous films) or in "pre-existing worlds" in which fans can easily enter ("The Wizarding World," Middle-Earth, or Gotham City).

A second approach to midnight movies, which examines the social, participatory, collective practices involved in midnight exhibition and filmgoing, provides a broader conceptual framework for understanding the connections between films as diverse as *Freaks, Harold and Maude*, and *Iron Man*. Shifting the emphasis to "*midnight* movies," this approach treats midnight movies as "the most social form of cinemagoing" (Hoberman & Rosenbaum 1983: 301) and refuses to strip films from their indispensable reception contexts. Here, midnight movies are defined not as a group of films or aesthetics but as distinct phenomenological events in the spaces where films, screens, and cult audiences meet. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I build on this work by conceptualizing "*midnight* movies" through four specific phenomenological sensations: *exclusivity*, *liveness*, *collectivity,* and *thematic immersion* – or, an intense closeness with the themes of the film text. Recent trends in blockbuster exhibition emphasize that the employment of "midnight" here is not necessarily literal but evokes cultified cinemagoing practices – such as long lines, sing-a-long participation, costuming, trivia, fan performance, prop-use, etc. – set apart from everyday, conventional modes of filmgoing.

Midnight movies

Exclusivity

Midnight movies bring with them a "sense of a truly unique, forbidden experience" set apart from the rest of the world (Mathijs & Sexton 2011: 160). Writing on *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, J.P. Telotte (1991: 103) also observes this "magical change or transformation" of the cinema auditorium at midnight, as onscreen media and offscreen activities construct an energy and aura unbeknownst to and set apart from "ordinary" cultural rhythms. This phenomenological exclusivity, or the notion that audiences feel as if they are taking part in a more "eventful," "special" form of cinemagoing, is *constructed* and *experienced* by both fan and industry practice, namely through modulations in *temporality* (the amount of time spent at the theater, the late-night showtime), *sociality* (the intensification of audience participation and interaction), and *materiality* (the construction of a themed environment which surrounds the film screening). Most obviously, the hour of midnight itself brings with it a certain built-in exclusivity since, by attending a movie in the late hours of the night – when much of the outside world is fast asleep – audiences distinguish themselves from more accessible, "mainstream" modes of cinema consumption.

Undoubtedly the most-studied midnight movie, *Rocky Horror* points to another form of exclusivity which emerges through social and participatory activity. In the autumn of 1976, a group of cinemagoers began "talking back" to characters, providing "counterpoint dialogue" in the form of "wisecrack retorts" such as answering rhetorical questions or mocking and scolding onscreen characters – "Buy an umbrella, you cheap bitch!" was yelled when Janet

uses a newspaper to shield herself from the rain (Hoberman & Rosenbaum 1983: 176). A few weeks later, coinciding with Halloween, fans began dressing up as *Rocky Horror* characters. Prop-aided activities were soon worked into the script: bells were rung; rice, hot dogs, toast, playing cards, and toilet paper were tossed around; water guns were fired, umbrellas were opened – activities which, importantly, coincided with specific scenes of the film. Costumed characters began running to the front of the auditorium to perform mid-screening "floor shows" – the most notable being "The Time Warp" – ranging from improvisational lip-synching to highly-choreographed dance sequences.

Because the social and participatory experience of *Rocky Horror* is so potent and phenomenal, it sometimes obscures the larger system of midnight filmgoing in which it is situated. The link between "midnight movies" and participatory cinemagoing can be found as early as the 1930s, when films were screened at midnight as part of "formal affairs" such as fundraisers and political conventions. These upper-class functions – which brought with them an additional class-based form of exclusivity – enveloped film screenings in social activities such as "patriotic dances," banquet dinners, and as one journalist observed at the midnight gala of *Broadway To Hollywood*, "general hoop-la outside the theater while the invited audience was gathering" (Mantle 1933).[2] Some of the earliest midnight exhibitions in 1960s New York also constituted "social events" where drugs, live music, and conversation all figured into the experience – they were "a lot like a party," as Andy Warhol remembered them (Hoberman & Rosenbaum 1983: 177). The most widely-used prop in midnight movie history, marijuana, perfumed the screenings of *El Topo*, *Reefer Madness*, *The Harder They Come,* and *Eraserhead*; at revival screenings of *Night of the Living Dead*, sections of campy dialogue were spoken in unison (Hoberman & Rosenbaum 1983: 126); live performance, scratch-n-sniff "Smell-O-Vision" cards, and complimentary "Pink Phlegmingo" vomit bags accompanied screenings of John Waters' *Multiple Maniacs*, *Polyester*, and *Pink Flamingos*, respectively; theaters in Australia screened *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* in "Dragarama" by installing disco balls and colored lights which were activated during the film's final party scene (Cettl 2010: 8).

Today's midnight exclusivity builds on earlier exhibition traditions. Whereas *Rocky Horror* exhibitors circulated pre-printed tickets and allowed advanced-booking, today's promotional campaigns for cult blockbusters liken the ticket-purchasing process to a Broadway show, calling on audiences to "Pre-book your tickets to the 3D event of the year" (Moulton 2014: 363); 1970s New York theaters permitted marijuana use in the auditorium, while contemporary exhibitors favor on-tap alcohol at their midnight programs; variations of the disco-induced "Dragaramas" of *Priscilla* continue at Secret Cinema's dance-party productions of *Grease* and *Dirty Dancing*; and, like the distribution of vomit bags at screenings of *Pink Flamingos*, exhibitors today provide free whoopee cushions (*Labyrinth*), inflatable "Inigo Montoya" swords (*The Princess Bride*), and franchise-specific "giveaways."

A few examples of these midnight giveaways include IMAX's "12:01" poster series for blockbusters such as *Cinderella, The Avengers* and *Skyfall*; collectible figurines at *The Amazing Spider-Man*; temporary tattoos at *Divergent*; and Harry Potter-inspired 3D glasses at *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2*. For premiere screenings of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, theater lobbies were transformed into storefronts for "Galaxy Premiere" merchandise, including individually numbered collectable tickets (30,000 were printed) inlaid with gold foil and tucked between sheets of acrylic. These "exclusive" giveaways in particular incentivize midnight screenings and make holdable an otherwise-immaterial experience of cinemagoing.

These examples may at first appear to contradict the grassroots, word-of-mouth spirit of midnight cinemagoing since, as properties of conglomerate Hollywood, their screenings are highly constructed, controlled, and commercial. Yet, as Mathijs and Sexton remind us (2011: 242),

even the midnight movies of the '60s and '70s did not emerge through a purely "'bottom-up' process." The implications here are threefold. First, it illustrates that pre-co-opted midnight movies were always in a sense co-opted, made possible and *constructed* by exhibitors and distributors. Consequently, "events that are 'manufactured, packaged, and controlled' should not necessarily be regarded as negating cult value" (Mathijs & Sexton 2011: 242).[3] Second, it means acknowledging the existence of power hierarchies among and within midnight communities. McCulloch (2011: 200–201), Mathijs and Sexton (2011: 176), and Grant (1991: 130) note that midnight participation is often accompanied by an "implicit pressure" to follow and conform to those with more knowledge, experience, and in turn, control in shaping midnight practices. Third, as Mark Jancovich (2002: 314) points out, although midnight movies first emerged and continue to be embraced as liberatory spaces for marginalized and underrepresented communities, midnight audiences "do not share a single, and certainly not a uniformly oppositional, attitude" toward mainstream society. They function not through a mechanism of opposition to mainstream but through a subcultural identity predicated on distinctiveness, "rarity," and "exclusivity" (Jancovich 2002: 309). Seen in this light, the cult value of blockbuster premieres and experiential cinemas resides in their ability to construct phenomenologically exclusive reception spaces – spaces which are felt as distinct from but in reality are shaped through commercial media industries.

Secret Cinema, a London-based experiential cinema company, offers highly-thematized screening events in which fans, explorable film-specific sets, and hired actors coalesce in ways that both intensify the film's reception and craft phenomenologically new, alternate narratives within the film's thematic framework. They promote their experiential screenings through a motto of "Tell No One," a model which invites fans to purchase expensive tickets without knowing which film will be screened – or even where it will be screened. Through an "aesthetic of secrecy" (Kennedy & Atkinson 2016b: 254), Secret Cinema's promotional campaigns drop thematic clues in social media spaces in the form of atmospheric trailers, carefully-worded riddles, and half-obscured photographs. Nick Curtis of *The Evening Standard* (2012) describes his ticket-purchasing experience as such:

> In November I attended Secret Cinema's screening of Frank Darabont's *The Shawshank Redemption*. After signing up online, I was issued with a new identity, Hal Wood, by the 'State of Oak Hampton' and told to report to Bethnal Green Library one Sunday evening. There were obscure clues to the film's identity (I thought it was *12 Angry Men*), hints that 1940s-style men's suits would be suitable apparel, under which guests should wear long johns and a T-shirt, for reasons that later became apparent.

Here, exclusivity is constructed by purposely concealing information in a medium and a market which typically provide instant gratification and open access.

Crucially, once midnight fans step into these reception spaces, they construct their own iterations of exclusivity and eventfulness through a process of "cultification" (Hills 2006: 162) in which typical, everyday cinemagoing practices are "cultified" through *elongated*, *immediate*, and *intense* fan engagement. Just as cult fans engage with movie texts over a long period of time by quoting, re-watching, and discussing, midnight fans also *elongate* the "ordinary" practice of going to the cinema. They purchase tickets days or weeks in advance; they anticipate, consume, and theorize pre-textual material – sometimes attending other film screenings just to catch the premiere of a teaser trailer; they re-watch the film to rehearse their cues; they buy props or stitch costumes; they plan pre-screening meet ups and contests; and they arrive to the theater hours or days early for a spot in line; and they socialize before, [sometimes] during, and

after a film's screening. Hoberman & Rosenbaum (1983: 181) note that *Rocky Horror* queues became social events in and of themselves, spaces where fans would "swap information, sing and dance on the sidewalk, compare their costumes," and discuss potential mid-screening cues. *Star Wars: Episode I* fans displayed this social elongation on national TV during CNN's "live, exclusive" interviews of fan queues. More recently, Hogwarts "house parties," official *Hobbit* "line parties," and more casual tailgating continue to cultify cinemagoing by expanding and stretching the spatiotemporal practice of moviegoing in outward directions.

Liveness and collectivity

Midnight fans also cultify and experience a mode of cinemagoing that is distinct from mainstream cinema receptions because of its heightened sense of "liveness." Martin Barker's work (2013: 57) compares various fields – sports studies, television studies, film studies, music studies, among others – to conclude that most scholars conceptualize liveness as a phenomenon which arises through a *simultaneity* of production and reception, a *bodily co-presence* between performers and viewers, and an *experienced risk* wherein "the performance is not 'locked,' and might be shaped by the audience's responses." This would seem to disqualify the pre-recorded, non-present, packaged experiences cinema offers its viewers; but at midnight, fans themselves become producers, performers, and shapers of textual and discursive meaning – as illustrated by Nick Curtis' aforementioned transformation into "Hal Wood." John Fiske (1992: 37) refers to these fan contributions as "enunciative productivities."

During midnight screenings of *The Room,* for instance, "fans" refashion themselves into improvisers, impersonators, cultural critics, and Tommy-tormentors as they dress up in tuxedos, throw footballs around the auditorium, toss spoons at the sight of the stock photo artwork in Tommy's Apartment, and cheer on the camera – "Go! Go! Go!" – as it yet again transitions between scenes by tracking across the Golden Gate Bridge. At other midnight events, franchise-specific information is shared and debated during trivia, costume, and impersonation contests; fan performances of original songs and poems pepper familiar worlds with new stories and emotional associations; costumed fans actively "try on" different identities, negotiating and articulating the (often hilarious) differences between superheroes and themselves. These live-action role plays may become quite intense – lightsaber or spell-casting duels in the cinema lobby, for instance – and serve as pre-textual entertainment for all midnight attendees. Borrowing from other "live" formats such as theater (role-playing), concerts (performance), sporting events (tailgating), and game shows (trivia), these enunciations transform cinemas into themed, electrically live spaces of participation distinct from the pre-programmed, prizeless, and unspecific nature of conventional pre-screening entertainment.

Experiential cinema, the most phenomenologically "live" of the midnight categories, may utilize outdoor or open-air screening spaces (Street Food Cinema and Rooftop Cinema Club), themed menus ("Tattoine Sunset" cocktails served at *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*) or live scoring (performances of John Williams' score alongside *Home Alone*) to infuse screenings with new, unorthodox sensory experiences (Atkinson & Kennedy 2016a). Fans who attend Alamo Drafthouse: Rolling Roadshow's annual "*Jaws* On The Water" view *Jaws* atop floating inner-tubes while scuba divers swim underneath and grab at their legs (de Ville 2011: 3). Secret Cinema plants performers – whose job often concerns pushing an event narrative forward – among the also-costumed audience, making attendees and actresses indistinguishable from one another. At productions of *Casablanca*, audiences might be invited to dance by a charming stranger, questioned by immigration officers, or approached by a "Hungarian wife who needs money to fly to the sanctuary of America" (Kingsford-Smith 2013) – or, at Secret Cinema's *28*

Days Later, they might find themselves covered in fake blood, strapped into laboratory beds, and "forced" to watch the film. It should be noted that even in these industry-constructed spaces of extreme phenomenological immediacy, fans play an active role in contributing to and reshaping them.

Regardless of the degree to which "liveness" imbues a midnight movie experience, midnight fans feel a sense of "alive-ness," what Barker calls "eventness," or "the creation of and participation in senses of heightened cultural togetherness" in the contexts of what fans perceive to be a once-in-a-lifetime gathering (2013: 57). This construction of subcultural togetherness begins merely by showing up to the "once-in-a-lifetime" event. Here the act of "having been there" is an "authenticating experience" which acts as a form of subcultural capital (Hills 2015: 105). The prestige and self-love that accompanies "having been there" denotes a level of commitment; it may indeed involve the hour of midnight (a commitment to stay awake), the price (a commitment to pay), the duration (a commitment to endure), the logistics (a commitment to research and plan ahead), or the location (a commitment to travel). Midnight fans actively choose to take part in a more inaccessible, taxing form of cinemagoing. They therefore tend to make assumptions about and project themselves onto other attendees, positing them as more committed, knowledgeable, and like-minded than typical cinemagoers (Moulton 2014: 371; de Ville 2011: 12).

Driven by this "impression of a collective effort," (Mathijs & Sexton 2011: 19) midnight crowds emerge as partly-imagined communities built on respect, affection, collectivity, homage, and camaraderie (Kawin 1991: 24; Mathijs & Mendik 2007: 4–8). Non-communal or negative behavior which might rupture this communalistic energy is regarded as violative (Moulton 2014: 372), and, while midnight fans can acquire subcultural capital through the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of a costume (Hills 2002: 133), the prestige that accompanies a trivia prize, or the laughter that follows a funny comment, fans who flaunt or try too hard to earn subcultural capital are often met with rejection (McCollugh 2011: 211).

Thematic immersion

In this final section, I want to suggest that cultified sensations of exclusivity, liveness, and (sub) cultural togetherness – when experienced in thematically-continuous screening spaces – can propel a process of *thematic immersion* in which fan phenomenologies move inward through the screen from the cinema auditorium into the thematic world of the text – *and that they do so collectively.* This notion of perceptual inward movement into the thematic world of the film is not a radically new idea. Hoberman and Rosenbaum (1983: 16) hint at it when they liken midnight movie viewing to Catholic transubstantiation, as "a spiritual passage from the physicality of a seat in a darkened theater to the physicality of an imaginary time-space continuum." Kinkade and Katovich (1992: 196) also write of an escapist "merging with the film." Mathijs and Sexton (2011: 18) emphasize the closeness "to the screen (enthrallment with the giant canvas), to fellow viewers (huddled together in communion), and to the subject matter (overly close-reading of themes and motives)."

Elsewhere (Moulton 2014: 374), I have mobilized Charles Acland's work on themed spaces (2003: 95) to argue that the intensified, continuous theming of reception spaces – either through industry constructions (franchise-specific decorations, hired performers, and giveaways) or fan constructions (costuming, prop-use, role-playing, and conversations) – can play a meaningful pre-textual role in the cultivation of phenomenological immersion and serve "as an entryway paratext for the movie to come." Literal examples of themed entryways are often observed in experiential cinema. For instance, The Alamo Drafthouse "erected a wooden house filled with

25,000 flies through which patrons could pass to attend" *The Amityville Horror* (2005) (de Ville 2011: 10); or take their presentation of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), which was held at Leatherface's house – complete with "skin lamps and rotting bones" – and accompanied with headcheese hors d'oeuvres. De Ville (2011: 10) shows how these pre-textual, themed exhibition practices actually date back to the traveling roadshow exhibitions of the 1920s and William Castle's horror-movie gimmickry of the 1950s. Castle would not only thematize lobby displays but also stage pre-screening activities which tapped into the thematics (often anxiety and dread) of the upcoming film – such as signing waivers and life insurance policies or, at screenings of *Les Diaboliques* (1955), situating ambulances outside and nurses inside cinema auditoriums (Clepper 2016).

In spaces where such intense thematic immersions are not offered by the industry, the many cultified cinemagoing practices discussed in this chapter offer a way of filling cultural lack (Fiske 1992: 33). As a diverse variety of film-specific enunciations coalesce, fans find themselves in an environment in which onscreen characters, songs, and objects obtain tangible presence off-the-screen. Fans thusly move closer to the fictional world, "a little way out of normal structures and arguably into a liminal border zone between the real world and the diegesis, where the viewer eats the same snacks or wears the same outfits as the characters on screen" (Brooker 2007: 155). Will Brooker, who focuses primarily on television viewing, writes that pre-viewing and viewing rituals allow fans to access and experience "flow," a term borrowed from psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi to describe the total "sense of immersion, where the everyday is transcended and the participant enters a different state of being, a form of communion with a text, with a process, and sometimes with other participants" (2007: 152). Pre-viewing and viewing rituals, Brooker writes, include both simple practices such as providing commentary, turning off lights, and silencing phones and more extensive practices such as "dressing up for a *Star Wars* home screening in Queen Amidala lipstick with Leia hair-buns while feasting on 'Wookie Cookies' and 'Yoda Soda'" (2007: 155).

Brooker's framing of thematic ritual as a gateway to immersion allows room for both the midnight viewing performances (*Rocky Horror*, *The Room*) and outbursts (*Troll 2*, *Freaks*, *Pink Flamingos*) during repeated immersion experiences and the intensification of everyday cinematic viewing etiquette – such as "don't talk," and "don't text" – during first-time immersions (blockbuster premieres, in particular). However, Brooker's argument (2007: 159) puts forth the notion that this phenomenological immersion into the diegesis "does not seem dependent on the company of others." This hiccup contradicts scholarship on both classic midnight movies (Wood 1991: 160; Austin 1981) and newer midnight experiences (Moulton 2014; Klinger 2007) which observes that fans experience inward sensations of immersion while also retaining an appreciation and a sense of belonging with each other even after "flow" begins.

Midnight blockbuster attendees, for instance, describe midnight audiences as more "quiet," "respectful," and "appropriate" than "everyday" audiences (Moulton 2014: 374–375). That is, midnight audiences laugh, cheer, and cry at the "right" times. Take this fascinating account from a fan as he recalls his first midnight screening of *Batman* (1989):

> The movie kicked off at midnight and … *those loud fuckers made this one of the best moviegoing experiences of my life*. As the opening credits rolled, *the theater roared with applause*. With each name that appeared, *the crowd got louder*. Somewhere around Bob Ringwood and Danny Elfman, *the place was going bananas*. And then this popped up on the screen: "Songs Written and Performed By Prince." *The crowd booed like mad*. And then, just as quickly it started recognizing *how hilarious it was that they cheered* everything except Prince and then *they started laughing*. I mean … wow, this was already an

> awesome time! *The crowd achieved self-awareness and a singular mind* at this moment. And throughout the rest of the movie, *it carried us through* the soon-to-be classic one-liners, action sequences and reveals.
>
> ("FlashBack 66: *Batman* (1989)," emphasis added)

These observations speak to Julian Hanich's (2014: 339) work on collective viewing, where he argues that a "higher level" of continuous – what he calls "thematic" – recognition and appreciation of other fans can occur in "specific moments of high emotionality and collectivity." In this instance, immersion and enjoyment are increased as moviegoers perceive each other to be "acting jointly" and "feeling jointly" as they watch the film together. Put another way, midnight fans in particular remain aware of the synchronicity and harmony with which the community *jointly acts*, whether in the form of unified participation cues during *Rocky Horror* (Mathijs & Sexton 2011: 176; Wood 1991: 157; Grant 1991: 130) or the "appropriate," well-timed emotional responses at midnight blockbuster premieres.

The phenomenological sensation of "homecoming" (Brooker 2007: 163) in a thematically-continuous space with assumedly like-minded people strengthens the sensations of what Hanich (2014: 344) calls "we-intention": *practical collective intentionality* (as midnight fans we have a common goal to enjoy the midnight experience together), *cognitive collective intentionality* (we share a common knowledge, opinion, or taste), and *affective collective intentionality* (we have a common mood, emotional response or energy). This suggests that fans would rather enter into an immersive experience of "flow" with others rather than journey there alone. Viewed in this context, we might rethink cultified cinemagoing not as a practice set apart from or in resistance to conventional consumption but as a blueprint of moving beyond it, of setting the terms for fans to become immersed in a themed world made up of both physical and filmic elements – an immersion, as Andrew Sarris once wrote, "beyond all reason" (Telotte 1991: 5).

As this chapter has shown, we need to undertake a holistic approach to *midnight movies,* one which both digs deeper into the forms of immersion at midnight movie events and re-examines specific *midnight* cinemagoing practices in relation their *movies*' thematic framework or diegetic world. How might watching *Eraserhead* or *Donnie Darko* in a sparsely attended theater while the outside world is fast asleep funnel phenomenologies into textual themes of isolation, death, and dreams? How does thematic immersion function when pre-or-mid-viewing enunciations are shifted to post-viewing environments, like the two-day "Lebowskifest" in which fans screen *The Big Lebowski* and head to bowling alleys the following night? Might there be a thematic connection between so-bad-they're-good films and the collective heckling that occurs at their viewings, in which socially "bad" behavior is used to construct "good" sensations of community? How might midnight blockbusters' recent shift toward a decentralized "first" through earlier time slots affect sensations of exclusivity and participatory culture? There are many questions to answer – and the clock is ticking.

Notes

1 It should be noted that *The Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2* record included only midnight screenings while *The Force Awakens* screenings began at 7 P.M. (through midnight) on Thursday and included marathon ticket sales, which were sold for as much as $59.99 each.

2 For additional examples see "City to welcome FIDAC Tomorrow," in *The New York Times*, September 14, 1930, pp. 33; "Midnight Movie Stars Kay Kyser: 'That's Right, You're Wrong'" in *The Atlanta Constitution*, December 14, 1939, p. 8; and "ODD Fraternity To Entertain At Swimming Party This Evening," in *The Atlanta Constitution*, February 19, 1938, pp. 11.

3 I am by no means negating or calling into question the role of fans in the creation of midnight cinema-going experiences, and indeed, the commercial failures of overly-designed midnight faire such as the *Rocky Horror* sequel *Shock Treatment* or the more recent *Snakes On A Plane* speak to that power.

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